

Indiana House of Representatives

News and Information

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STATEHOUSE REPORT FROM REP. TRENT VAN HAAFTEN

INDIANAPOLIS – By the time you read this, we will have completed the first half of the 2005 session of the Indiana General Assembly. These last days have seen a hectic pace on the major issues that will define this year's Legislature.

Since I have written this report prior to the end of the first half, I will have to wait until next week to discuss the initiatives that successfully passed out of the House. If a bill passes the House, it goes to the Senate for consideration. During the second half of the session, Indiana House members will consider bills that were passed out of the Senate. Many bills will be changed significantly in the opposite chamber.

At this point, there are a number of important bills in the House. These include daylight-saving time, a state inspector general, government efficiency, economic development and the rising cost of prescription drugs.

My concerns about the state budget remain the same. This budget cuts state support for most schools in Indiana, including all of the schools in my legislative district. This budget grossly underestimates the amount of money needed to fund the Medicaid program, which provides health care for those most in need: seniors, children and the disabled. This budget caps the amount of local property tax relief provided by the state through Property Tax Replacement Credits (PTRC), without providing another funding source for relief. I am very concerned that these tactics will force local property tax increases, and put this budget in the red.

It is important to remember that the budget bill is a work in progress at this point in the legislative session. In the weeks to come, the Indiana Senate will put its own mark on the budget. I anticipate this budget will go through many different versions before we wrap this session up at the end of April.

Next to the budget, daylight-saving time has been the hottest topic in the House. Five counties in southeast Indiana are in the Eastern Zone and already observe daylight time, while five counties in northwest Indiana and five in southwest Indiana are in the Central Time Zone and observe daylight time.

This legislation only addresses one part of the time question in Indiana. The House majority rejected efforts by several lawmakers to petition the federal government, conduct public hearings across our state or have a statewide referendum to determine if we should go into the Central Time Zone. Such a change can only be made at the federal level. Considering the heated debate that daylight-saving time generates in Indiana, I think it would have been proper to provide a forum where the public finally has a chance to make their feelings known.

If HB 1034 passes, then Posey and Vanderburgh Counties will be an hour behind the rest of Indiana the entire year. During the gubernatorial campaign, our new governor stated that it was time to put all of Indiana in the Central Time Zone. Unfortunately, this is not the position that he has carried into this legislative session. I fear that Indiana is preparing to align its time with New York instead of the Midwest.

Many of you have contacted me with your opinions on the time issue. This is one issue where very different opinions exist. No matter how I vote, there will be some people who disagree with me. I plan to vote against HB 1034 because it fails to consider placing the entire state on Central Time. Indiana should be taking the necessary steps to move towards Central Time and HB 1034 is yet another example of southwest Indiana being disconnected from our capitol.

Another issue generating concern at the Statehouse is the governor's proposal to create the post of inspector general. The goal of the Inspector General is laudable, to help ferret out corruption in government. However, I disagree with giving an appointed person the power to charge someone with a crime. That is why we elect our county prosecutor.

Obviously, I feel close to this issue as a result of my service to you as an elected prosecutor. I was always aware of the trust that was placed in me by the people. I know that all of our prosecutors are diligent in carrying out this trust. If we give an appointed person the ability to override a prosecutor's decision, I believe we are changing the very structure of our government in a harmful manner.

My hope is that we will be able to reach some compromises that allow an inspector general to work on fraud and corruption, yet also allow local prosecutors to do the job they were elected to perform. Already this session, there has been a bipartisan effort to temper some of the governor's proposals that seem aimed at reducing public participation.

In the space I have remaining, let me touch on other highlights from the past week:

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE: House Bill 1008, approved by the full House, will create a state Department of Agriculture and an Office of Rural Affairs. I have supported this concept since my arrival in the House last year. These two agencies will ensure that farming plays a part in any economic development efforts, and that the state will work to improve the quality of life in rural Indiana. Agriculture annually contributes more than \$5 billion to the state's economy.

SMALL BUSINESS: House members approved one measure (House Bill 1822) that will help reduce the impact of unneeded government regulations on small businesses in Indiana. State agencies will be required to provide an economic impact statement before adopting any rule that impacts small businesses, and agency officials will be encouraged to explore alternatives that are less burdensome. There are more than 445,000 small businesses in Indiana, which are responsible for nearly 50 percent of the state's jobs.

AFFORDABLE PRESCRIPTION DRUG PLAN DEFEATED: One disappointment this week came when the House majority defeated an effort to give Hoosiers greater access to more affordable prescription drugs. House Democrats tried to amend House Bill 1745 to enable the state to take part in I-SaveRx, a program that enables consumers to purchase safe and affordable prescription refills from licensed, inspected pharmacies in Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom.

The program – which is already available in Illinois, Wisconsin, Kansas and Missouri – has enabled participants to see cost savings of up to 50 percent on their prescription drugs. Throughout the rest of this session, I will continue to look for ways to give Hoosiers the chance to purchase affordable medicines to stay healthy.

This past week, 14 students from Mt. Vernon High School visited the capitol and observed the House in session. It gives me great pride to have local visitors to the Statehouse, especially our youth. This was a great opportunity for them to learn about their state government. I believe I enjoyed the visit as much as the students! I would encourage all of you, both young and old, to visit your State House. I will be more than happy to show you around.

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This Report can be accessed on the Internet at www.IN.gov/H76